GCSE prose set text

Tacitus: Germanicus & Piso

Germānicus et Pīsō (edited extracts from Tacitus, Annals 2.55-82 and 3.1-15)

Summary of the story

Tiberius sent Germanicus to the East to solve some long-standing problems on the fringes of the empire, including a crisis in Armenia; at the same time he sent Piso to Syria as governor to keep an eye on Germanicus and report back to him. The prescribed text begins after Piso and Germanicus have arrived in Syria. Germanicus, however, was more concerned with his political mission and set off for Armenia. After making a settlement in Armenia he visited Egypt. Meanwhile, in Syria Piso had reversed or cancelled Germanicus' orders. On his return to Syria, Germanicus quarrelled with Piso, then fell ill. He believed that Piso had poisoned him, and on his deathbed he asked his friends to avenge his death. Germanicus' wife Agrippina sailed to Italy, intent on revenge. Piso was in Cos when Germanicus died. Although Germanicus' supporters had appointed a new governor to replace him, Piso returned to Syria and attempted to recover the governorship by force. However, he was unsuccessful. He then returned to Rome, where he was put on trial. Although he refuted the poisoning charge, he could not answer the charge of corrupting the soldiers and abusing his position as governor. However, popular feeling was against Piso. Before the trial was concluded he committed suicide.

Tacitus claims he is impartial (sine īrā et studiō, 'without indignation and partisanship', Annals 1.1.3). The facts he reports are generally accurate, but he tends to emphasise the oppressive aspects of the imperial system and concentrate on the faults of the emperors. His hostility to Tiberius is evident; he stresses Tiberius' hypocrisy and duplicity, and favours the more sinister interpretation of Tiberius' motives. The Romans regarded history as a branch of literature. An historian was expected to tell a good story in a highly descriptive, dramatic and emotional style. It was accepted that he would invent speeches and elaborate on circumstantial detail. Tacitus wrote his history of the 2 events of AD 18-20 in about AD 114, almost a century afterwards. Although he had access to contemporary accounts and records, he does not give much information about his sources, and from the level of detail it is clear that there is a large element of speculation and imagination.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>People</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiberius</td>
<td>Tiberius Julius Caesar Augustus; Roman emperor AD 14-37; adopted son of Augustus, the first emperor of Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germanicus</td>
<td>Germanicus Julius Caesar; born 15 (or 16) BC; nephew and adopted heir of Tiberius; great-nephew (by adoption and marriage) of Augustus; commander-in-chief of the Roman army in the East</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cn. Piso</td>
<td>Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso; governor of Syria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agrippina</td>
<td>wife of Germanicus; granddaughter of Augustus</td>
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<tr>
<td>Plancina</td>
<td>wife of Piso; she came from a noble and wealthy family</td>
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<tr>
<td>Livia</td>
<td>widow of Augustus; mother of Tiberius; grandmother of Germanicus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gnaeus Sentius</td>
<td>governor of Syria after the death of Germanicus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martina</td>
<td>a notorious poisoner</td>
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<tr>
<th>Places</th>
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<tr>
<td>Syria</td>
<td>Roman province on the eastern edge of the Roman empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armenia</td>
<td>kingdom on the eastern border of the Roman empire</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cous</td>
<td>Cos, an island off the coast of Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brundisium</td>
<td>modern Brindisi, the main Italian seaport for travel to and from Greece and further east</td>
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**Piso in Syria**

at Cn. Piso, quo celerius consilia inciperet, postquam Syriam ac legiones attigit, largione et ambitu infimos militum iuvabat.²

*But so that Gnaeus Piso might start his plans more quickly, after he had reached Syria and the legions, he began to help the most disreputable of the soldiers with generous gifts and bribery.*

cum veteres centuriones, severos tribunos demovisset, locaque eorum clientibus suis attribuisset,

*When he had got rid of the experienced (OR: long-serving, literally ‘old’) centurions and the disciplined (severos) tribunes and had assigned their positions to his hangers-on (clientibus),*

desidiam in castris, licentiam in urbibus, lascivientes per agros milites sinebat.⁴

*he allowed slackness in the camp, hooliganism in the cities and the soldiers to run riot through the countryside.*

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¹ = plans to thwart Germanicus
² Tacitus’ condemnation shown through use of largitione and ambitu; infirmos underlines fact he is trying to win over the disreputable elements.
³ parallel phrases veteres centurions and severos tribunos suggests the impediment to Piso’s plans – they represent morality and true Roman values.
⁴ tricolon with examples of ill-discipline. Helps to emphasise very negative connotations and the extent of Piso’s cunning.
nec⁵ Plancina, uxor Pisonis, se gerebat ut feminam decebat, sed exercitio equitum intererat,

_Nor did Plancina, Piso’s wife, act as befitted a lady: she used to attend the cavalry exercises_

et in⁶ Agrippinam, in Germanicum contumelias iaciebat.

_and hurled insults at Agrippina and Germanicus._

nota haec Germanico, sed praeverti ad Armenios instantior cura fuit.

_These things known to Germanicus, but there was a more pressing need to attend to the Armenians._⁷

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In an omitted section, Germanicus averts a crisis in Armenia by supporting the people’s choice of king; then, in the following year (AD 19), he visits Egypt to see the ancient sites. On his return to Syria, he learns that all his orders to the legions and cities have been cancelled or reversed. As a result he has a row with Piso, with bitter recriminations on both sides. Soon afterwards Germanicus falls ill, and Piso waits to see how the illness progresses.

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⁵ By extension, his wife is no better – _nec_ (negative first word to introduce her); damning phrase about her behaviour follows. Plancina is cast by Tacitus as the evil opposite of Agrippina.

⁶ The use of this word is hostile: the sense is of ‘attacking’ someone.

⁷ This shows Germanicus has the greater good of Rome at heart, putting public before private matters.
The death of Germanicus

There is no evidence beyond Tacitus’ persuasive rhetoric of Piso’s complicity in Germanicus’ death. The human remains/ spells etc found in Germanicus’ house could have been fabricated as evidence against Piso. Notice the words of general innuendo and suggestion: persuasio / creditur / incusabantur. Belief not hard fact.

saevam⁸ vim morbi augebat persuasio veneni a Pisone⁹ accepti;

*His belief that poison had been received from Piso increased the terrible virulence of his illness.*

Belief in magic was widespread and certain objects were thought to have the power to deliver people to the gods of the Underworld. These included the remains of human bodies, spells, curses and lead curse tablets with the name of the intended victim inscribed on them.

et reperiebantur solo ac parietibus erutae humanorum corporum reliquiae, carmina et devotiones et nomen Germanici plumbeis tabulis insculptum, cineres semusti ac tabo obliti¹⁰ aliaque malefica¹¹ quibus creditur¹² animas numinibus infernis sacrari.¹³

Disinterred remains of human bodies were being found under the floor and in between the walls, spells and curses and the name of Germanicus inscribed on lead tablets were found, and also charred cremated remains smeared with rotten flesh and other pieces of sorcery, by means of which it is believed souls can be condemned to the gods of the underworld.

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⁸ saevam = powerful word to start on.
⁹ Notice Piso’s name right next to word for poison!
¹⁰ the ashes had been taken from a funeral pyre before being fully cremated.
¹¹ other objects of black magic (voodoo objects) might include things connected with the victim such as hair, nail clippings, pieces of clothing or wax images, because it was believed that in order to gain control of someone the witch or magician often needed something connected with that person.
¹² Tacitus shows he thinks this kind of belief is mumbo-jumbo: cynicism – but he still says it to damn Piso.
¹³ This passage has given grotesque details in a long/disjointed and ghoulish catalogue. Tacitus savours the details of the evil magic.
simul missi a Pisone incusabantur quod valetudinis adversae
signa exspectarent.\(^{14}\)

*At the same time, people sent by Piso were being accused of
awaiting signs of ill health.*

haec Germanico haud minus ira quam per metum\(^{15}\) accepta sunt.
componit epistulam qua amicitiam\(^{16}\) ei renuntiabat.

*This was all taken by Germanicus as much in anger as through
fear. He wrote a letter in which he broke off diplomatic
relations with him.*\(^{17}\)

Germanicus paulisper se credidit convalescere; deinde\(^{18}\) fessum\(^{19}\)
fiebat corpus.

*For a little while Germanicus believed he was getting better;
then his body became weak.*

ubi finis aderat, adstantes amicos ita adloquitur:

*When the end was nigh, he spoke to his friends who stood
around his bed in this way:*  

\(^{14}\) This subjunctive shows that this is an alleged reason; it’s not necessarily the
truth.  
\(^{15}\) as much in anger (IRA= ablative) as though fear (PER + accusative)—
*variation of construction* – G’s reactions say a lot about the very real threat
Piso poses. “The ablative case (īrā) and the preposition (per) both express
the reason. This is a good example of *variātiō.*”

\(^{16}\) amicitia = diplomatic relationship expected of an official. To call off =
tantamount to dismissal.  
\(^{17}\) As commander-in-chief of the forces in the East, Germanicus was Piso’s
superior, so could have issued the order to return to Rome. As we learn later,
Piso went only as far as Cos.  
\(^{18}\) The improvement in G’s health is skated over/compressed. Tacitus is much
more interested in people`s reactions.  
\(^{19}\) The word is emotive: it makes G seems vulnerable and pathetic.
‘erit vobis occasio querendi apud senatum atque invocandi leges.\textsuperscript{20}

You will have an opportunity to complain in the senate and to invoke the laws\textsuperscript{21}.

decet\textsuperscript{22} amicos non prosequi defunctum ignavo questu, sed quae voluerit meminisse, quae mandaverit exsequi.  

Friends ought not to escort a dead man with pointless lamentation but to remember what he wanted and to carry out what he entrusted them with.

vindicabitis vos, si me potius quam fortunam meam diligebatis.’

You will avenge me, if you used to love me rather than my rank and success.’

amici, dextram morientis amplectentes, iuraverunt se vitam ante quam ultionem amissuros esse.\textsuperscript{23}

His friends, grasping the right hand of the dying man, swore that they would give up their lives rather than the pursuit of revenge.

Scale and wide geographical generalisations – provinciae (i.e. Syria)…circumiacentium populorum…exteræ and reges (possibly= Parthians – who gave up fighting out of respect)> climax – venerationem omnium. Ratchets up the pathos.

\textsuperscript{20} Sense of due process is suggested by the neat balance of the two phrases (+gerundive) querendi senatum….invocandi leges.

\textsuperscript{21} G does not ask friends to bring murderer to justice by petitioning the emperor BUT raise matter in the senate where might get more sympathetic hearing.

\textsuperscript{22} Important first word: what the friends OUGHT to do. He does not want mourning BUT action.

\textsuperscript{23} The words here offer a picture of true loyalty (earlier adstantes ...diligebatis ...amplectentes) and obedience.
neque multo post mortuus est,\textsuperscript{24} ingenti luctu provinciae et circumiacentium populorum.

*And not long afterwards, Germanicus died, and there was tremendous grief throughout the province and the surrounding peoples.*

The following passage builds up qualities through abstract nouns and parallel phrases – *comitas...mansuetudo* (abstract); allies and enemies (parallel/opposites) had reason to respect Germanicus.

indoluerunt exterae nationes regesque: tanta fuerat illius *comitas* in socios, *mansuetudo* in hostes;

*Foreign peoples and kings mourned – for so great had his friendliness to allies and mercy to enemies been.*

propter vultum eloquentiamque venerationem omnium adeptus erat.

*Because of his good looks and his ability in speaking he had gained the respect of all.*

Tacitus introduces comparison to exaggerate esteem in which G held and his achievements and the memory. [Alex died at 32 and had conquered FAR mora, Germanicus at 33] Ends with a tricolon.

et erant qui illum magno Alexandro *ob formam aetatem genus*\textsuperscript{25} locumque mortis adaequarent;

*And there were those who compared him to Alexander the Great\textsuperscript{26} on account of his appearance, short life, manner and the place of his death ,*

\textsuperscript{24} He dies on 10 Oct AD 19: immense grief ensues. Germanicus died at Antioch in Syria.

\textsuperscript{25} this example of asyndeton gives weight and stress to each individual word.

\textsuperscript{26} Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), the son of King Philip II of Macedon, in northern Greece. He acquired an empire which stretched from Greece to India, and founded the city of Alexandria in Egypt. He died at the age of thirty-two, Germanicus at thirty-three (or thirty-four). The cause of Alexander’s death was uncertain and there were rumours that he had been poisoned.
nam affirmaverunt utrumque corpore decoro praeditum (1),
genere insigni ortum (2), vix triginta annos natum periisse (3). 27

– for they maintained that both men had been endowed with a
dayiful physique, both were descended from a noble family,
and both had died when scarcely thirty years old.

**Mourning**

at Agrippina, 28 quamquam defessa luctu et corpore aegro, 29
impatens tamen erat omnium quae ultionem morarentur.

*But Agrippina, although she was exhausted by grief and her
body was sick, was unable to endure anything that might delay
revenge.*

ascendit navem cum cineribus Germanici et liberis, 30

*She boarded a ship with her children and Germanicus’ ashes* 31

Babylon, where Alexander died, is a very long way from Antioch in Syria, but
most readers in Rome would regard both as remote cities in the East.

27 **TRICOLON**
28 **Shift of focus to her now**
29 **Variation:** two different grammatical phrases “tired BY GRIEF” and “with
her body sick”
30 **Notice the focus on children:** very useful for arousing sympathy – they’ve
been left fatherless.
31 the Roman custom was to cremate the bodies of the dead on a funeral pyre.
After the body was cremated, the ashes were collected and placed in an urn,
which was then buried in a tomb. Germanicus was cremated in Syria, but his
ashes were taken back to Rome for burial in the family tomb.
miserantibus omnibus\textsuperscript{32} quod femina summa nobilitate pulcherrimoque matrimonio, quae venerationem omnium mereret, tunc ferales reliquias sinu ferret, incerta ultionis.\textsuperscript{33}

– everyone pitied her because she, a woman of the highest nobility and in a most splendid marriage, a woman who deserved the respect of all, was then carrying the remains of the dead man in her lap, uncertain of revenge.

Pisonem interim apud Coum insulam nuntius adsequitur\textsuperscript{34} periisse Germanicum.\textsuperscript{35}

*Meanwhile news reached Piso on the island of Cos*\textsuperscript{36} *that Germanicus had died.*

\textit{Rejoicing in this, he slaughtered victims and went to temples.}

\textsuperscript{32} EVERYONE!
\textsuperscript{33} Notice how this phase is tacked on at the end of the sentence making it very noticeable. It is a feature of Tacitus’ style to express the main idea of a sentence in an appendage to the main clause, and to build up gradually to a climax.
\textsuperscript{34} Many historic present tenses are used: caedit etc.
\textsuperscript{35} Very formal sentence: we are led to wonder how he will react... REJOICING will be a shock!
\textsuperscript{36} Cos is an island off the coast of Turkey, about five hundred miles from Syria, on the route back to Rome. Piso’s departure from Syria and his deliberately slow return journey to Rome is mentioned earlier.
\textsuperscript{37} Very brief sentence. He seems to be thanking the gods, but how does Tacitus know this (and his mood)?
Not only did Piso himself act with excessive gladness, but Plancina became more arrogant – she changed her mourning clothes (for the death of her sister) to festive attire for the first time.

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38 The wife seems to be worse (etiam magis).
39 Official mourning for the sister might last a year (?) but she instantly changes into bright, happy clothes.
40 Means “bright” but has the connotation of HAPPY, too. How can clothes be happy? Transferred epithet (hypallage) – she is happy. The adjective laetum contrasts with lūctum and suggests Plancina’s mood.
Mourning (back at Rome...)

at Romae,\textsuperscript{41} postquam fama Germanici valetudinis percrebuit cunctaque, ut ex longinquo, aucta in deterius adferebantur, dolor, ira, questus erumpebant:\textsuperscript{42}

\textit{But at Rome, after the rumour of Germanicus’ health spread and everything, as usually happens from a distance, was being reported with pessimistic exaggeration, grief, anger and lamentation began to break out:}

ideo nimirum Germanicum in extremas terras relegatum esse,\textsuperscript{43} ideo Pisoni permissam provinciam.\textsuperscript{44}

\textit{that was evidently the reason (they said) why Germanicus had been banished to very remote lands, that was why the province had been entrusted to Piso.}

\textsuperscript{41} Tacitus now takes us back now to the period of G’s sickness. The fact that the reader knows that at the time of the rumours G was already dead lends dramatic irony to this scene. Tacitus is doing this wants to establish that public sentiment was firmly on the side of G.  
\textsuperscript{42} dolor, ira, questus erumpebant – note the rapid progression of reactions to the news. No connection between the three words for dramatic effect.  
\textsuperscript{43} extremas...relegatum = emotive words which almost certainly distort the truth, but reflect popular feelings and suspicions.  
\textsuperscript{44} \textit{ideo Pisoni permissam provinciam} – alliteration of “P”s to hammer home the message: Piso immediately becomes the scapegoat.
hos vulgi sermones mors Germanici, ubi nuntiata est, adeo incendit\textsuperscript{45} ut, ante edictum magistratum,\textsuperscript{46} ante senatus consultum, sumpto iustitio desererentur fora, clauderentur domus.\textsuperscript{47}

When the death of Germanicus had been announced, the news so inflamed this kind of talk among the people that, before a edict of the magistrates, before a decree of the senate, a break in legal business was taken, the lawcourts were abandoned and the great houses closed.

ubique silentium et gemitus.\textsuperscript{48} et quamquam insignibus lugentium non abstinebant, altius animis maerabant.

Everywhere [there was] silence and lamentation. And although they did not refrain from the outward signs of mourning people, they grieved more painfully in their spirits.

navigatione hiberni maris nequaquam intermissa Agrippina Brundisio appropinquat.\textsuperscript{49}

Having in no way interrupted her voyage over the wintry sea, Agrippina approached Brundisium.

\textsuperscript{45} the shock re. the death of G is enhanced through Tacitus `s use of a result clause, together with the verb incendit (imagery: associated with fire).
\textsuperscript{46} it was usual to announce the beginning of official public mourning by official edict; here, however, the outburst of public grief is spontaneous. The People seem to have taken the law into their own hands and stopped public business.
\textsuperscript{47} parallel phrases summing up the cessation of usual business: the death of an extraordinary man calls for extraordinary reactions.
\textsuperscript{48} silentium..gemitus – short clause which sums up with great economy wholesale mourning. Tacitus liked to be brief and concise. No verb [= ellipse].
\textsuperscript{49} the narrative returns to Ag `s journey back to Rome from Syria. The detail of hiberni maris suggests that she is so desparate to complete her desire for revenge that she even sails in winter when sailing was normally curtailed.
interim adventu eius audito multi amici et plurimi milites qui sub Germanico stipendia fecerant ruerunt ad portum.

*Meanwhile when they heard of her arrival, many friends and a great number of soldiers who had served under Germanicus rushed to the harbour.*

simulac visa est navis, complentur non solum portus sed etiam moenia ac tecta turba maerentium et rogantium inter se, silentione an voce aliqua egredientem exciperent.

*As soon as the ship was sighted, not only the harbour but also the city wall and roofs were filled with a crowd of people mourning and asking each other whether they should receive her in silence or with words of some kind as she disembarked.*

navis lente appropinquat, non celeriter, ut solet, sed cunctis ad tristitiam compositis.

*The ship approached slowly, not with speed, as usually happens, but with all the signs of mourning/ everything arranged for mourning.*

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50 amplification of multi > plurimi. MANY > VERY MANY
51 the verb *ruerunt* “rushed” – shows a deep sense of loyalty and urgency that the memory of Germanicus inspires. Their keen anticipation of the arrival of the last remains of G is further picked by the word *simlac* which begins the next sentence.
52 Repetition of the sound -NTIUM in the two pres participles help capture a sense of wholesale mourning.
53 silentione an voce aliqua > they care enough to want to pitch their response just right. What does Agrippina want?
54 navis lente – as though even the ship is in mourning. = ‘pathetic fallacy’ (ships cannot grieve!)
55 non celerite ut solet - usually sailors were only too happy to reach their home port safely.
postquam duobus cum liberis, feralem urnam tenens, egressa e 
nave defixit oculos, idem fuit omnium gemitus.56

After Agrippina had disembarked with her two children, holding 
the funeral urn and had lowered her eyes, there was the same 
groan from all.

Revenge

Tiberius the emperor – who is acting as presiding magistrate in the court - 
sets out the charges against Piso which the Senate should consider. The 
questions are: did Piso disobey Germanicus and rejoice in his death or did 
he murder him? Did Piso lead a mutiny? The Senate should give Piso a fair 
trial, and not be swayed by Tiberius’personal grief for Germanicus.

die senatus Tiberius orationem moderatam habuit. “Piso” inquit 
“patris mei legatus et amicus erat.

On the day of the senate’s meeting, Tiberius delivered a 
restrained speech. ‘Piso,’ he said, ‘was my father’s 
representative and friend.57

56 Stage-managed for maximum effect but by whom? Agrippina or Tacitus? A 
very poignant but dignified scene.  idem fuit omnium gemitus = fitting 
climax to mourning section, like some Greek tragedy – total consensus among 
the Roman people about where their support and their sympathies lay.
57 Tiberius is referring to his adoptive father, the Emperor Augustus. Augustus 
had chosen Piso to be governor (lēgātus) of Hispania Tarraconensis (formerly 
Nearer Spain), one of the three provinces into which Spain was divided.
It was I who sent him as a helper to Germanicus with the authority of the senate to administer affairs in the East.\textsuperscript{58}

integrissimis animis est diiudicandum utrum Piso contumacia et certaminibus vexaverit iuvenem exituque eius laetatus\textsuperscript{59} sit, an scelere eum extinxerit.\textsuperscript{60}

It is for unbiased minds to determine whether Piso annoyed the young man with arrogance and rivalry and rejoiced in his death, or whether he destroyed him/did away with him in a crime (OR whether he committed the crime of killing him).

simul repute utrum legiones ad seditionem incitaverit.”

Consider at the same time whether he incited the legions to rebellion.

\textsuperscript{58} Piso was governor of Syria, while Germanicus was in command of the forces in the East. Syria was an imperial province and therefore the appointment of its governor did not strictly concern the Senate. Tacitus depicts Tiberius as an emperor keen to involve the Senate in decisions; he also implies that Tiberius was claiming that the Senate shared responsibility for the disastrous events in Syria.

\textsuperscript{59} Notice the oxymoron of DEATH and REJOICE.

\textsuperscript{60} EXSTINGUO is a very striking verb: to put out, quench, extinguish. It makes a dramatic ending to a long sentence.
deinde biduum criminibus obiciendis statuitur utque post intervallum sex dierum reus per triduum defenderetur.

Then two days were allocated for bringing the charges and it was decreed that after an interval of six days the accused would be defended for three days.

tres amici Germanici consimili\textsuperscript{61} studio obiecerunt Pisonem, odio Germanici et rerum novarum studio,\textsuperscript{62} milites per licentiam et sociorum iniurias corrupisse;\textsuperscript{63}

Three friends of Germanicus,\textsuperscript{64} with similar zeal, alleged that Piso – through hatred of Germanicus and through enthusiasm for revolution - had corrupted the soldiers by means of allowing disorder and through the ill-treatment of the people of the province;

\textsuperscript{61} Stresses a united front on the prosecution side.
\textsuperscript{62} The chiastic arrangement of words emphasises the assonance of \textit{odiō} and \textit{studiō}, putting emphasis on Piso’s motives. \textit{odio Germanici [AB] et rerum novarum studio [BA]}, i.e. ablative genitive/genitive/ablative
\textsuperscript{63} This treason charge refers to Piso’s behaviour when he was governor of Syria before the death of Germanicus, not to his attempt to regain the governorship by force after Germanicus’ death.
\textsuperscript{64} Only a private individual could bring a prosecution; there was no police force or public prosecution service.
postremo ipsum Germanicum devotionibus et veneno occidisse.

finally that he himself had killed Germanicus with curses and poison;

\[105\]
tum et Pisonem et Plancinam, postquam sacra et immolationes nefandas\(^{65}\) fecissent, petivisse armis rem publicam.\(^{66}\)

then that both Piso and Plancina, after they had performed rites and unspeakable sacrifices, had taken up arms against the state.

**Revenge Part 2**

defensio in ceteris crimini bus trepidavit;

*The defence stumbled in the other matters;*\(^{67}\)

\[110\]

nam neque ambitio militum neque injuria in provinciam, ne contumeliae quidem adversum imperatorem,\(^{68}\) negari poterant: \(^{69}\)

*for neither bribery of the soldiers nor harm done to the province, not even insults against the general could be denied.*\(^{70}\)

\(^{65}\) Notice this phrase consists of 9 syllables: after a short word SACRA it is striking. NEFANDUS literally means ‘cannot be spoken, too evil to be uttered’.

\(^{66}\) This charge refers to Piso's attempt to regain control of the governorship of Syria by force after the death of Germanicus. The dramatic moment is brought out by leaving state REM PUBLICAM to the very end of the sentence.

\(^{67}\) i.e. the charges besides murder, as listed in the rest of the sentence (bribing the soldiers, mistreating the provincials, abuse of Germanicus).

\(^{68}\) TRICOLON of charges. Germanicus, the commander-in-chief of the Roman forces in the East = IMPERATOREM. Here this does NOT mean ‘emperor’, and does NOT refer to Tiberius.

\(^{69}\) Piso’s position was difficult because most of the charges were upheld; the series of negatives (*neque ... neque ... nē ... quidem ... negārī*) and the vivid choice of verb (*trepidāvit*) emphasise the weakness of the defence’s case.

\(^{70}\) The serious treason accusation of taking up arms against Rome is not mentioned here.
solum veneni crimen potuit Piso diluere.\textsuperscript{71}

*Piso was only able to refute the charge of poison.*

ut simul populi ante curiam\textsuperscript{72} voces audiebant: non temperaturos manibus si Piso sententias patrum evasisset.\textsuperscript{73}

*But voices of the people could be heard before the senate-house: they would not refrain from violence if Piso escaped the verdict of the senators.*

eadem erat Plancinae invidia. atque ipsa, dum Pisoni spes erat absolutionis, sociam se cuiuscumque fortunae\textsuperscript{74} futuram esse et, si necesse esset, comitem exitii\textsuperscript{75} promittebat:

*There was the same ill-feeling towards Plancina. And she herself, while there was for Piso hope of acquittal, promised that she would be his companion whatever his misfortune and, if it were necessary, his partner in death.*

\textsuperscript{71} *DILUERE* literally ‘to wash away, dissolve, dilute, wash, drench’!
\textsuperscript{72} Piso's trial took place before the Roman senators. However, since meetings of the Senate often took place in the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, *cūria* here may refer in general to a meeting place of the Senate.
\textsuperscript{73} The hostile mob gathered outside was threatening violence against Piso if he were acquitted by the Senate.
\textsuperscript{74} Literally, 'of whatever fate'. Plancina means that she would follow her husband into exile if that was his punishment; this was what a good wife was expected to do.
\textsuperscript{75} Some Roman women even committed suicide when their husbands were sentenced to death.
sed paulatim segregari a marito coepit.  

*But gradually she began to distance herself from her husband.*

quod postquam Piso sibi exitiabile esse intellexit, dubitavit an causam diceret amplius.  

*Since Piso understood that the case was spelling doom for him,* he hesitated whether to plead his case further.

itaque, tamquam defensionem in posterum diem meditaretur, pauca scribit obsignatque et liberto tradit;  

*And so, as if he were going to plan his defence for the next day,* he wrote a little and sealed the letter and handed it to a freedman;

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76 Notice this short, snappy sentence – after a long one – reveals her cunning nature. She’s abandoning him. The Latin style of Tacitus in the 1st century AD was to have short, terse, pithy, concise language rather than long-winded sentences.

77 The powerful six-syllable word *exitiāble* marks the moment of Piso’s surrender and Plancina’s abandonment.

78 Plancina had been Piso’s best hope of a pardon. She was a friend of Livia, the mother of the Emperor Tiberius. Livia was a powerful woman; she had great influence over her son and she hated Agrippina. Tiberius gave in to her pleas and Plancina was exonerated. However, thirteen years later in AD 33, after the death of Livia, Tiberius reopened the prosecution and Plancina committed suicide (Tacitus, *Annals* 6.26).

79 The three indicative verbs joined by *-que* and *et* give a sense of a series of methodical actions. The verbs are in the historic present tense for vivid effect.

80 What do you think Piso was writing? A will, a letter to his children, a letter to the Emperor? A suicide note? Tacitus later reveals that Piso was writing a letter to Tiberius, in which he proclaimed his innocence and his loyalty, and asked him to look after his sons.
tum solita curando corpori exsequitur.

*then he attended to his personal needs, as usual.*

deinde multam post noctem, egressa cubiculo uxore, claudi ianuam iussit;

*Then in the dead of night, when his wife had left his bedroom, he ordered the door to be closed;*

et prima luce | perfosso iugulo, | iacente humi gladio, | repertus est.\(^{81}\)

*and at dawn he was found, his throat cut, a sword lying on the ground.*

\(^{81}\) Notice the style of this last line: 4 virtually 2-word, staccato phrases for a stunning conclusion (and a sad end for Piso).
Discussion

(Some of this refers to the full Latin text – you are only reading extracts – so not all of it is relevant)

Discussion 1
As soon as he arrived in Syria as governor, Piso began to encourage lawlessness and insubordination in the army. This raises the question of what exactly Piso’s intentions were. Tacitus does not supply an explanation for Piso’s behaviour, beyond that it was to further his plans. Presumably his actions were designed to gain control of the army, win popularity with the soldiers and incite unrest among the provincials. He might have hoped to transfer the loyalty of the legions from Germanicus to himself; he could then deny Germanicus their support. Secondly, by allowing the soldiers to behave in a way that would make them unpopular in the province, he was making it more difficult for Germanicus to achieve a peaceful settlement in the East. It seems that Piso was going much further than his instructions from Tiberius allowed; Tiberius had (allegedly) ordered Piso to block all Germanicus’ orders.

Tacitus’ condemnation of Piso’s behaviour is shown by his use of pejorative vocabulary: largītōne, ambitū, dēsidiam, licentiam, lascīvientēs - all in a prominent position at the head of their phrases or clauses. The verb sinēbat firmly puts the blame on Piso. The adjectives veterēs and sevērōs are emphasised by being placed before the nouns they describe. Piso’s wife, Plancina, plays a prominent part in Tacitus’ account. Her conflict with Agrippina, Germanicus’ wife, underlines the conflict between the two men, and later on Tacitus exploits the contrast between the behaviour of the two women.
The first impression of Germanicus is favourable; he takes his mission seriously and is not distracted by the behaviour of Piso and Plancina. The linking passage introduces a note of doubt; he takes his eye off the ball when he makes a sight-seeing trip to Egypt.

Discussion 2
The account of the quarrel between Piso and Germanicus is brief. The narrative concentrates instead on Germanicus’ illness, especially the gruesome and macabre details associated with black magic. Despite the atmosphere of suspicion this produces, Tacitus provides no evidence for Piso’s complicity in Germanicus’ illness. The accounts of the human remains and curses found in Germanicus’ house could have been fabricated as evidence against Piso, and it is to be expected that Piso should want to know how Germanicus’ illness was progressing.
Moreover, it could be argued that the emphasis on persuāsiō venēnī suggests that the poisoning was in Germanicus’ imagination. Finally, Tacitus is relying on hearsay when he says that Germanicus ordered Piso to leave Syria. Nevertheless, some readers at least will have the impression that Piso was to blame. Tacitus creates this impression by concentrating
on the circumstantial details of magic, Germanicus’ own belief that he had been poisoned, his fear and his dismissal of Piso, and the allegations that Piso had sent people to look for signs of worsening health.

Discussion 3
It is possible that Tacitus had access to an account of Germanicus’ last words, but more likely that he invented the speech to suit his narrative, as was the custom in ancient historiography. Germanicus insists on vengeance (vindicābitis vōs, ultōnem) and bringing the culprit to justice, without naming either Piso or Tiberius. He does not openly voice any suspicion of Tiberius, but his request that the murderer should be brought to justice before the Senate rather than before the Emperor suggests that he thought Tiberius might be complicit. At this point it would be good to check that students remember that there were rumours that Tiberius had secretly ordered Piso to arrange Germanicus’ death (see the introductory passage).

Discussion 4
Instead of a balanced, critical assessment of Germanicus’ qualities and achievements, Tacitus describes the popular reaction to his death. Sympathy for Germanicus is created from the start by the focus on the grief-stricken response. The shock spread outwards from Syria like a wave; the description of the places and peoples affected is vague, but has the effect of suggesting the extent of the grief. The qualities picked out for praise are his friendliness towards his allies, his merciful treatment of his enemies, his good looks and his eloquence. Although Germanicus was undoubtedly popular, Tacitus seems to be exaggerating his good qualities here. According to Professor Goodyear (vol. II, pages 415-6) the claim that Germanicus showed mercy to his enemies is not supported by Tacitus’ own account of Germanicus’ campaigns in Germany. On the other hand, his success in dealing with the provinces in the East and Parthia is evidence of skilful diplomacy.

The comparison with Alexander the Great perpetuates the popular myth of Germanicus’ brilliance. But, despite the superficial similarities Tacitus notes, the difference is that Alexander conquered an enormous empire; Germanicus conquered nothing. Tacitus reports the comparison (erant quī … adaequārent), rather than making it himself, a technique which distances the author from his material. This could be taken as suggesting that he does not endorse it. On the other hand, he does not provide any contrasting view, which may suggest that he had some sympathy with the comparison (or perhaps that he just wanted his readers to sympathise with Germanicus). Tacitus’ assessment of Germanicus and the reactions to it could be compared to an obituary or funeral eulogy. Like an obituary or eulogy it concentrates on the virtues of its subject and ignores any faults, and there could be an element of idealisation. The language too is highly rhetorical and thus appropriate to a eulogy. For example, in the list of similarities the first three have no coordinating particle (ob fōrmam aetātem genus); this example of asyndeton gives weight and stress to each individual word. The final tricolon (utrumque corpore
decōró praeditum, genere īnsignī ortum, vix trīgintā annōs nātum) repeats and expands the previous statement of the similarity of beauty, birth and youth, and the rhyme (utrum … praeditum … ortum …nātum) echoes the idea of similarity.

Discussion 5
The narrative now focuses on Agrippina. Tacitus creates a poignant image of Agrippina clutching Germanicus’ ashes and her children as she departs, drawing a strong contrast between her previous good fortune and her current (tunc) vulnerability. The emotive detail of the ashes is mentioned twice (cum cineribus Germānicī, fēralēs reliquiās sinū ferret) and the reader is invited to share the point of view of the pitying spectators (miserantibus omnibus). The overall effect is to create pathos. Tacitus also shows Agrippina’s steely determination and courage, brought out by another contrast, between her physical frailty and her mental strength. The emphasis is on revenge: the word ultīō frames the description. The final phrase in the sentence and the section, incerta ultīonis, leaves the possibility of revenge hanging in the reader’s mind and creates suspense. Significantly, the next word is Pisōnem, the object of Agrippina’s vengeance, as attention now shifts abruptly to Piso. As Agrippina is leaving Syria, Piso and Plancina, on the island of Cos, receive the news of Germanicus’ death. The juxtaposition of the two scenes accentuates the stark difference between their reaction and the plight of Agrippina. The language suggests excess and contains explicit disapproval: immoderātō, magis insolēscit.

Disapproval is also implicit in quō gāvīsus. The joy of Piso and Plancina is contrasted with Agrippina’s grief. Plancina’s behaviour is depicted as even worse than her husband’s (nōn modo … sed etiam magis). However, it is possible that the arrival of the news of Germanicus’ death happened to coincide with the end of the period of mourning for Plancina’s sister.

Discussion 6
The narrative jumps back in time to retell the illness and death of Germanicus from the perspective of the people in Rome. The series of three nouns in asyndeton (dolor, īra, questūs) puts the focus on the emotional popular reaction. Tacitus establishes Germanicus’ popularity and, by the use of rumour, puts suspicion on Tiberius without naming him. How much truth is there in Tacitus’ account of Tiberius’ behaviour? Syria was certainly far away on the edges of the empire. However, Germanicus was not banished, although Tiberius may have wanted him out of the way. The Introduction says: ‘Being unable to dispose of him [Germanicus] openly, Tiberius sent him to the East as commander-in-chief of the Roman forces there, to settle several longstanding problems on the fringes of the empire.’ So, Germanicus was sent to do an important job. The language is emotive (extrēmās, relēgātum) and there is some distortion of the truth. Nevertheless, Tacitus may be reporting accurately what people in Rome said about Tiberius’ actions. The description of the reaction to the announcement of Germanicus’ death concentrates on the spontaneity (repetition of ante) and sincerity (altius animīs) of grief.
Discussion 7
The narrative now returns to Agrippina and her arrival in Italy. It might be useful to think in terms of film and tragedy. Students could be asked to consider this episode as a scene from a film. Visualising the scene as a film shot helps to show how Tacitus moves from a panoramic view of the ship in the distance and the crowd converging, to individuals in the crowd, and finally to the lone figure of Agrippina. All eyes are on Agrippina, but she looks at the ground modestly. Making défixa the finite verb rather than ēgressa (est) focuses attention on the emotive detail. The other visual details in this sentence, the children and Germanicus’ ashes, maximise the pathos. The climax of the whole paragraph is the reaction of the crowd: idem fuit omnium gemitus. The reader is invited to visualise the scene as one from a Greek tragedy, Agrippina as the heroine and the onlookers playing the rôle of the chorus. Agrippina is shown as a woman who knows how to manipulate the crowd to gain their sympathy. And Tacitus, by exploiting the tragic associations, draws attention to her determination and desire for vengeance.

Discussion 8
The transport of Germanicus’ remains from Brundisium to Rome is described as if it were a formal funeral procession, although Germanicus’ funeral had taken place in Syria. As the procession bearing Germanicus’ ashes passed through a town, the people behaved as if they were celebrating a funeral. Elaborating the details of the procession and its reception further emphasises Germanicus’ personal popularity. Tiberius plays a prominent part in honouring Germanicus in a way suitable for a distinguished soldier and imperial heir. Perhaps this was because he was afraid of offending popular opinion, which was definitely on the side of Germanicus. Although Tacitus makes no comment, the narrative as a whole exposes Tiberius’ hypocrisy.

Discussion 9
As governor of an imperial province, Piso would usually have been punished directly by the Emperor. However, Tiberius made the decision that Piso should be tried before the Senate. The explanation implied in his speech is that he wants to act fairly by separating public from private vengeance. However, a more sinister motive is that he wanted to distance himself from Piso, because of the rumours surrounding his involvement in the death of Germanicus. Tacitus quotes Tiberius’ speech as if he is reporting the exact words of the Emperor. (More accurately, in the original Latin Tacitus begins with indirect speech and moves into direct speech at ‘If Piso as governor …’.) It is quite possible that Tiberius did make a speech to the Senate on the occasion, and Tacitus may even have had access to it. However, it was the
practice of Tacitus, as of other ancient historians, to invent speeches. Even if Tacitus did use a speech of Tiberius as a source, it is very likely that he would have adapted it.

Tiberius outlines three main charges against Piso: insubordination, murder and treason. He makes an important distinction between the first two main issues: did Piso (a) disobey Germanicus and rejoice at his death or did he (b) kill him? The former charge can be broken down into two separate but related charges of insubordination and inappropriate behaviour after Germanicus’ death. Both, particularly the matter of his behaviour after Germanicus’ death, are minor. However, the murder charge is very serious. Tiberius makes clear that if the first and lesser charge were proved, he would renounce his ties of friendship with Piso; if the more serious charge of murder were proved, Piso would be condemned to death. He does not mention any penalty for the treason charge. Throughout the speech he stresses impartiality and fairness: the Senate are to judge Piso ‘with open minds’ and he is not to be treated any differently because he is accused of harming one of the imperial family. Tiberius also includes the possibility that the prosecution may have invented, or at least exaggerated, the treason charge. On the surface, Tiberius seems to be fair. But, in the context of what Tacitus has already said or hinted about Tiberius’ involvement and his tendency to hypocrisy, a reader might conclude that the speech itself is an example of Tiberius’ insincerity.

**Discussion 10**

After reading this section check students have a clear understanding of the three charges brought against Piso:

1. As governor of Syria he corrupted the Roman soldiers stationed there, encouraging them to behave badly and mistreat the people of the province. This is a charge of treason (*rērum novārum studii*, ‘desire for revolution’).
2. He murdered Germanicus.
3. He made an armed attack on Rome by attempting to regain the governorship of Syria by force. This is a charge of treason.

Charges 2 and 3 are the same as those outlined by Tiberius in his speech. However, the first charge, relating to Piso’s behaviour as governor of Syria, is more serious. Rather than charging Piso with disobeying Germanicus, the prosecutors focus on his treatment of the army and the provincials, claiming that his motive was wanting to stir up a rebellion.

**Discussion 11**

Piso’s position was difficult because most of the charges were upheld; the series of negatives (neque … neque … nē … quidem … negārī) and the vivid choice of verb (trepidāvit) emphasise the weakness of the defence’s case. Although Germanicus’ death remained suspicious, there was no positive evidence of poison, so the only hope for the defence was to concentrate on refuting the charge of murder. The charge of attempting to take control of the province (treason) is not explicitly mentioned here, although it is referred to in a later passage not included in this extract. Tacitus’ account of the trial is impressionistic and selective, not a
detailed report. Piso’s position was made even more difficult by the popular feeling against him, based on the belief that he had murdered Germanicus; there was pressure on the senators to find him guilty.

Discussion 12
The focus is now on Plancina. The narrative moves back to a few days earlier in the trial when the outlook for Piso looked more positive. At first Plancina promised to follow him into exile or even to commit suicide if he were condemned to death. This is what was expected of the wife of an upper-class Roman. A famous example is Arria (Pliny Letters 3.16). When her husband was given the chance to commit suicide instead of being executed, she took the initiative:

She drew the weapon, stabbed her breast, pulled out the dagger and offered it to her husband, adding the immortal and almost divine words: ‘Paetus, it doesn’t hurt’.

(Pliny Letters 3.16)

But gradually Plancina separates herself from her husband, withdrawing her emotional support when she sees that it isn’t in her own interest. The powerful six-syllable word exitābile marks the moment of Piso’s surrender and Plancina’s abandonment. Piso’s final isolation is highlighted in the physical desertion of ēgressā cubicūlō uxōre. Tacitus does not state explicitly that Piso committed suicide. The narrative leaves open the possibility that he was assassinated.